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INDIAN TERRITORY EVER KNEW

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When I was a boy in Kansas, in the early 90's, people were still talking about Belle Starr, though she had been shot to death several years before I was born. We lived near the Territory border—Oklahoma was always called "The Territory" or "The Nation" in those days—and Belle had visited our town more than once. Many of our neighbors were well acquainted with the Starr gang. My father and my grandfather had both known Belle personally, and I saw her daughter and other relatives many times.

Having heard so many first-hand accounts of her exploits, I thought that I knew all about Belle Starr. It was not until 20 years later that I learned that most of the stories were not true. By the turn of the century the fireside legends had swallowed up the truth, so that even Belle's intimate friends found it difficult to separate fact from fiction.

Nobody knows exactly when or where Belle Starr was born. Frank James, brother of the famous Jesse, always contended that she was a native of Kansas. Bill Stiles, who called himself "the last surviving member of the James gang," asserted repeatedly that Belle was born in the mountains of Kentucky.

The newspapers of my boyhood have it that she was born near Georgia City, Mo., February 3, 1846. I used to go fishing on Spring River not far from Georgia City, and have seen the old Shirley farm which the pioneers pointed out as Belle's birthplace. According to the inscription on her tombstone, however, the blessed event occurred at Carthage, Mo., February 5, 1848. This information was probably obtained from Belle's daughter Pearl, who paid for the tombstone. Or Joseph Dailey the stone-cutter may have got it from the Cherokee tribal records, since Belle was required to give the date and place of her birth when she contracted a tribal marriage with Sam Starr. Mrs. Flossie Doe, who claims to be a granddaughter of Belle Starr, rejects both the date and the place of the tombstone inscription—she says that Belle was born near Medoc, Mo., on February 3, 1848.

Burton Rascoe, author of the best biography that has yet appeared, studied the books of the Recorder of Deeds at Carthage, and discovered that Belle's family did not move to southwest Missouri until June, 1848, therefore Belle couldn't have been born near Medoc or Carthage in February of that year. He suggests that she may have been born on a farm near Shirley, in Washington County, Mo., sometime prior to 1848. With reference to the Cherokee tribal records, he thinks that Belle doubtless told the truth about the day and the month, "but if she exercised her woman's privilege of giving an incorrect date for her birth year, we may assume that she subtracted from rather than added to her age"—particularly in view of the fact that she was marrying a man 10 years her junior.

S. W. Harmon, author of a rare and famous book entitled **Hell on the Border**, says that Belle Starr was born at Carthage, Mo., February 3, 1846, which makes Belle two years older than she was ever willing to admit. Most newspaper and magazine writers have followed Harmon rather than the inscription on the tombstone. Steele Kennedy has always claimed that Belle was born in Carthage, Mo., February 3, 1844—this makes her four years older than Flossie Doe's estimate.

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Not only the place and date of Belle's birth, but even her given name is uncertain. The majority of her biographers hold that her name was Myra Belle Shirley, but I have met old-timers who knew her as Mary Belle, May Belle and Mable. A long-haired fellow who called himself Raymond Hatfield Gardner and claimed to be Belle's cousin, told me that she was christened Belle Shirley, and was never called Myra or Mable. Mrs. Flossie Doe, who insists that she is Belle's granddaughter, gives the name as Myra Maebelle. The anonymous authors who wrote about her for the *Police Gazette* in the 80's always called her "Bella Star, Queen of the Outlaws," and many newspapers adopted this spelling; there was also a book entitled *Bella Starr*, published by Richard K. Fox of New York, in 1889. Frank James, in his autobiography, spelled the name Bell, without any final vowel. Caesar Lombroso, the Italian criminologist who wrote about Belle at great length, always refers to her as Bell-Star—hyphen and all!

Belle's father was John Shirley, who came to Missouri from Kentucky, but was probably a native of Virginia. He was known as Judge Shirley, and may have been a judge or at least a justice of the peace, although there is no official record of this. But most biographers regard the "judge" as merely one of the honorary titles so common in Missouri at that time.

Her mother's name is usually given as Eliza, but it is signed Elizabeth Shirley in the land-office records at Carthage. Her maiden name is apparently unknown, even to Mrs. Flossie Doe who claims to be her great-granddaughter. There is a persistent legend—mentioned by Bill Stiles and others—that Mrs. Shirley was somehow related to the famous feudin' Hatfields of Kentucky, but whether by blood or marriage is not clear. The only writer who mentions her maiden name is Raymond Hatfield Gardner who declared in a newspaper story that Belle told him her mother was a Hatfield. Gardner told me privately in 1932 that her name was Lizzie Hatfield and that she had been married before her union with Judge Shirley, but he does not affirm this in his published articles.

The Shirleys lived on a farm near Medoc, Mo., at the place later known as Georgia City, some 10 miles north of Carthage, in the 50's. It is not known just when they left Medoc and moved into Carthage, although Flossie Doe thinks it must have been when Belle was about 10 years old—in 1858, according to her reckoning. They were certainly in Carthage in the Spring of 1861. The Carthage Public Library has a copy of *The South-West News*, published at Carthage by C. C. Dawson, dated March 29, 1861, with the following advertisement:

CARTHAGE HOTEL  
North Side Public Square,  
John Shirley, Proprietor.  
Horses and Hacks for Hire.  
A good stable attached.

According to local tradition, this hotel was located on the spot now occupied by the Carter Hardware Company, about the middle of the block, opposite the north entrance of the present Court House.

Duncan Aikman and other writers have enlarged upon the social prominence enjoyed by John Shirley and his family in Carthage. In 1938 I talked with Miss Jessie Stemmons and Miss Laura Wood, librarian and assistant librarian of the Carthage Public Library. They have a wide acquaintance in Carthage, and Miss Wood has lived there all her life. They tell me that the old residents always laughed at this part of the Belle Starr saga. The Shirleys, according to the old-timers, were just ordinary tavern-keepers—not prominent socially or otherwise. I asked if there were any relatives of Belle Starr now living in Carthage. Miss Wood re-

plied that she didn't know. "If there are any," she added, "they are not talking about it."

The only member of the Shirley family that I located in Carthage was Mrs. Sidney Knight, whose mother was a Shirley. Her people came from Virginia in the early days, but she is not sure about her relationship to John Shirley, the father of Belle Starr. Charles M. Shirley of Orange, Calif., is Mrs. Knight's cousin, and he wrote me that John Shirley was a cousin of Mrs. Knight's mother. It seems that several members of this family were associated with the Starrs and Reeds in the Indian Territory. Charles M. Shirley knew Pearl Starr in Fort Smith, and was also acquainted with Henry Starr who was, he says, a nephew of Sam Starr. Henry Starr was shot to death, not so many years ago, while robbing a bank at Harrison, Ark.

Belle had two brothers, the older being Pres—presumably Preston. It is not clear just what Pres did during the Civil War, but he was not a soldier so far as is known. Belle's other brother was known in Carthage only as Bud Shirley, but it appears that his name was Edward. Harmon says that Ed was Belle's twin brother, and Flossie Doe follows him in this. Col. Ward L. Schrantz of Carthage, author of a very interesting local history, quotes a Civil War veteran who mentions "Bud Shirley . . . about 22 years old, medium-sized, dark complexioned, and as brave a man as you could find anywhere. He had a younger sister, Myra, who was about 16, and although small for her age she was rather a pretty girl, and everybody liked her."

Harmon and other writers have said that Ed or Bud Shirley was a captain under Quantrell, and was killed in action while serving with Quantrell's guerrillas in February, 1862. Aikman would have us believe that Belle was personally acquainted with Quantrell, and often visited her brother at Quantrell's camp. Flossie Doe thinks that Ed served with General Joe Shelby. But the truth is that young Shirley was never an officer, never served with either Quantrell or Shelby, never enlisted in the Confederate army or any other. He was just a backwoods ruffian with Confederate sympathies—what the Southerners called an "irregular" and the Yankees called a bushwhacker.

There is a story that Ed had sneaked home for a visit—Aikman says February, 1862, Flossie Doe thinks it was in 1863. Anyway he was with his parents in Carthage, presumably at the Shirley Hotel. The Federals had found it out, and were planning to capture him. Belle was at Newtonia, 35 miles from Carthage, when she heard about this, and before she could get a warning to Ed the Federals arrested her in the Newtonia postoffice. She was questioned by a Major Enos (Flossie spells it *Eno*) who was a local man and understood the situation. Major Enos did not release Belle until the cavalry had plenty of time to capture her brother. But Belle rode across country, by short cuts and through the woods, her horse at a dead run, and reached Carthage before the soldiers arrived. When the raiders came up she met them on the porch. "If you're looking for Ed, you're too late—he's gone up Spring River on important business. Is there anything I could do for you?" True or not, this tale was widely told, and Belle was locally famous for daring and horsemanship at the age of 16.

In the Summer of 1864 Ed Shirley and some other irregulars had stopped at a Mrs. Stewart's house near Sarcoxie, Mo., when they were attacked by members of Company C, 15th Missouri Cavalry. In the fight which followed young Shirley was mortally wounded. The late T. C. Wooten of Carthage was an eye-witness of this killing. He said that the members of Company C were all local boys, and that the Shirleys (probably through one Milt Norris, who had been with Ed at Mrs. Stewart's house) knew the name of the trooper who did the shooting.

Colonel Schrantz quotes a letter from Mrs. Rhoda A. Hotell of Sarcoxie, who describes the killing and adds: "Next day Shirley's mother and Myra,



the 16-year-old sister of Shirley, appeared at Sarcoxie. The latter had a belt around her waist, from which swung two big revolvers. She was not timid in making it known that she meant to get revenge for her brother's death. As is well known in Carthage, Myra Shirley is the girl who afterward acquired bandit fame as Belle Starr. So even in her early youth she was showing the character which afterward made her notorious."

Some have said that Belle was a Confederate spy. Flossie Doe says that in 1863 she "began carrying messages and scouting for the Confederates." Aikman tells us that she was a scout for Quantrell—told him who secretly sympathized with the Yankees, who had money to be stolen or stock to be driven off, and so on. It has even been said that Quantrell was Belle's first lover, that Belle disguised herself as a man and rode with the guerrillas, took part in many battles, helped to burn houses and murder Yankee sympathizers, and killed four men with her own revolver before she was 18 years old. I have found no evidence that any of these tales are true.

Colonel Ward L. Schrantz, editor of the *Carthage Evening Press*, interviewed several old-timers who knew the Shirley family when they lived in Carthage. "I talked with several old people who had gone to school with Myra Belle, who was described as being rather small, pretty, vivacious and of fiery temper. The Shirleys seem to have had a good reputation here, and this goes also for Myra Belle. The family went from Carthage to Texas in 1864."

There is no doubt that the Shirleys were all redhot Southerners, and that their tavern was a meeting-place for Confederate soldiers, guerrillas and bushwhackers. "Late in the Summer of 1864," writes Flossie Doe, "the Shirley House was burned. Mr. Shirley had received but had not heeded repeated warnings to leave the country." The whole town of Carthage was destroyed by fire in September, 1864. I have not been able to learn whether the Shirley Hotel was burned earlier in the year, or lost in the general conflagration of September.

It is not clear just when the Shirleys left Carthage. Aikman thinks it was about the end of the War; Flossie Doe says it was shortly after the Shirley House burned, late in the Summer of 1864. There is no record of their trip South so far as I know, but we next find them settled on a farm near Scyene, Texas, about 10 miles east of Dallas.

To Texas after the War came Jim Reed, son of a well-to-do farmer near Rich Hill, Mo. Reed had been a guerrilla, had been somehow associated with Bud Shirley, and he may have known Belle in Missouri. Flossie Doe's story is that Belle promised to marry the man who would avenge her brother's death, and implies that Jim Reed had murdered the soldier who killed Bud Shirley. Harmon and Aikman had evidently not heard this tale. Aikman says that Belle had known Reed slightly in Missouri, and two days after his arrival in Texas she suddenly decided to marry him.

Bernie Babcock tells us that Belle didn't care for Jim Reed at first, because he was too religious—"his chief pleasure was attendance at church." Harmon says that Reed was a quiet, religious fellow, but had been a friend of the James boys.

It was S. W. Harmon who started the story that Belle's wedding took place in the wilderness near Scyene, with Belle and Jim sitting on their horses, surrounded by 20 of Jim's pals, also on horseback, to act as witnesses. Frederick S. Barde, newspaperman of Guthrie, Okla., says that Bill Anderson, notorious bushwhacker under Quantrell, was present. Joe Synar adds that "Belle's horse was held by John Fisher, who afterward became a noted outlaw." All this was supposed to have occurred in 1866. Flossie Doe repeats the tale of the horseback wedding, which she says was solemnized by one of Reed's friends who was a Justice of the Peace. There is no real evidence that the famous "hossback weddin'" was anything more

than backwoods horse-play, or that Belle and Jim Reed were ever legally married at all.

Judge and Mrs. Shirley were horrified at this escapade, and tried to prevent their daughter and Jim Reed from living together. Flossie Doe says that they hid Belle on a farm in Palo Pinto county, Texas, the home of her older brother Preston; through the efforts of Reed's sister she was rescued from this concealment and taken to the Reed farm in Missouri. Aikman thinks that Reed, some four months after the "marriage," abducted Belle from her father's house. Later on, according to Aikman, Judge Shirley came to Missouri, kidnapped Belle, and took her back to Scyene. Reed thereupon stole her again, and this time there was some shooting, but nobody seriously hurt.

Raymond H. Gardner, who claims to be Belle's cousin, tells an even better story. Belle, he says, "grew friendly with the James and Younger boys, becoming the sweetheart of one of the gang, Jim Reed. After the war they took time to get married, but the judge did not care for his bandit son-in-law and refused to recognize the marriage. He sent her to a boarding-school, but Jim thrilled the girls' dormitory by bursting in during the night and carrying away his wife in her night dress. The judge then sent her to an uncle in Colorado, and again Jim took her away."

Belle's first child was born, probably at the Reed farm in Missouri, in 1869—in September, according to Harmon. Belle named the child Pearl, but the Reeds always called her Rosie Lee. Flossie Doe says that "Grandma Reed"—the mother of Jim Reed—took care of Belle and her baby at this time.

Not long after the birth of his daughter, Jim Reed killed a man. According to Flossie Doe's story, the Reed brothers and the Shannon boys, neighbors in Missouri, took a race-horse to the Fair in Fort Smith, Ark. There they got into a dispute with a Fisher family, and "in the quarrel that followed Jim Reed's youngest brother, Scott Reed, was shot by mistake." Jim then killed the slayer of his brother, says Flossie—she does not say that the slain man was a Shannon. But she observes that "the quarrel almost assumed the proportion of a neighborhood feud," so we may be assumed that Jim killed one of the Shannon boys, not one of the Fishers. Aikman says plainly that Jim killed a Shannon, and that the Shannons were a gang of robbers.

Because of this killing, Jim Reed fled Missouri and took refuge in the Indian Territory. Many outlaws of that day did the same, because nobody could arrest them there save United States Marshals. It is probable that Jim visited, perhaps for the first time, Tom Starr's place, about 80 miles west of Fort Smith. This farm was the occasional hangout of Ellis Starr, father of Tom Starr and a well-known Cherokee desperado. If Belle was with Jim at this time, as Flossie Doe implies, she may have met Tom Starr's son Sam, described as "a handsome young fullblood" then about 13 years of age.

Jim Reed was wanted for the murder of Shannon, and there was a reward on his head, so that he didn't feel safe even in the wilds of the Territory. In 1870, according to Flossie Doe, the Reeds went to Los Angeles, Calif. Jim made the whole trip on horseback, Belle and her babe rode in a stage-coach. They traveled about Southern California on horseback, and even crossed into Mexico. "The time they spent in California," writes Flossie Doe, "was the happiest period of their lives. Years afterward, Myra could not speak of it without a trace of bitterness and regret."

It was in Los Angeles, according to Harmon, that Belle's second child was born, in 1871. It was a boy, and Belle named him Edward in memory of Ed Shirley, her brother who died at Sarcoxie, Mo., in 1864.

Late in 1871 or early in 1872 Jim got into trouble again, and had to flee from California. As Flossie Doe tells the tale, there was a lot of counter-



feit money in Los Angeles, and while Jim had nothing to do with this business, the officers who were investigating it happened to find out that he was wanted for murder in Arkansas.

When Jim learned that the Los Angeles police had spotted him he fled in the night on horseback, and made his way east through the cattle country. There was no Panama Canal then, but Belle and her two children came back to Texas on a windjammer around Cape Horn. Aikman gives the date of Belle's return to her father's home as 1872. Jim turned up at Scyene soon afterward, and Judge Shirley was now reconciled to the marriage—probably because of Belle's children.

Belle's older brother Pres seems to have been living on a farm in Palo Pinto county, Texas, at this time. The Shirley's had a fourth child now—Belle's younger brother. This boy was called Shug, later known as Doc, and was referred to as "a little boy" in 1872. It is supposed that he was born in Texas, shortly after the Shirleys arrived there in 1864 or 1865. It appears that Shug Shirley dropped out of sight later on—I have found no trace of him later than 1879. Flossie Doe wrote in April, 1933: "There is nothing that I would love better than to hear from this boy, Shug. I have never found a trace of him or his family, and it would be a wonderful pleasure to me to hear from this man or any of his children."

It seems that the Shirleys had left their farm and were living in Scyene when Belle and Jim Reed returned from California. "I have not been able to find out what year they moved to town," says Flossie Doe, "or what happened to John Shirley's farm." Flossie learned from Mrs. L. B. Thompson, daughter of John McDaniel of Scyene, that the Shirley home was a three-room house "almost directly back of where the schoolhouse now stands." Mrs. Thompson, who was 10 years old in 1875, often saw Belle riding her horse about the town. She says that Belle "rode around with the Younger boys some. They lived here then with their sister, on this site where my home now is."

The Reeds moved into the three-room house with the Shirleys, although six people in three rooms must have been a bit crowded. Aikman says that Judge Shirley bought Belle a ranch about nine miles away. Mrs. Thompson thinks that Belle had both her children with her at this time, and that Pearl attended school in Scyene. Belle and Jim managed a string of race horses, and did a good deal of trading. Belle attended to much of this business, as there was a price on Jim's head and it was necessary for him to keep out of sight. Jim was always mixed up in deals involving stolen cattle and horses, but Belle still had a pretty good reputation in Texas, as did Judge Shirley. Many people minimized Jim's criminal record too, regarding him as an ex-soldier persecuted by the Yankees and carpet-baggers. Aikman says that some of the best families in Dallas concealed Jim in their own homes, when he was hard pressed by the officers.

Aikman repeats the story that a deputy sheriff named Nichols put Jim in jail once, and Belle threatened to kill him. Nichols was shot dead in the street shortly after this, and Belle was generally credited with the killing. Many newspapers openly charged Belle with this murder, and I have seen a drawing in the *Kansas City Star* showing Belle on horseback, galloping furiously down a Dallas street, supposedly fleeing under fire after the shooting of Nichols. Buck Saunders of Berryville, Ark., who used to be a United States Deputy Marshal in the Territory, showed me a .45 Colt which he said was the pistol that Belle used to kill Nichols. There is no certainty about it, however, and I have found no record of Belle being officially charged with the murder. Jim Reed was released from jail soon after Nichol's death.

Flossie Doe does not mention the Nichols killing, but tells of another occasion when Jim was thrown into jail. "James was arrested in a little town," she says, "and Myra would not leave." The next day she

visited Jim, yearning a black dress and a heavy black veil. Later on it was discovered that Jim had escaped, disguised in his wife's costume, and that the "man" in the cell was Belle. "I have committed no crime," she told the jailer. "The Bible says that a woman should cleave to her husband, don't it? Well, I only did my duty." There is no record that she was ever punished for this crime, beyond a few days imprisonment.

It was in 1873, according to Aikman, that three masked ruffians raided Watt Grayson's cabin. Grayson was a rich Creek, said to have stolen a great sum of money from the tribal funds. The robbers tortured Grayson and his wife by putting ropes around their necks and pulling them up off the floor. After they had "hung" Grayson seven times and his wife three times, the Graysons gave up \$30,000 in gold that was hidden in the cabin. "Belle was innocently asleep in the ranch-house near Dallas, but Jim was recognized as one of the robbers," says Aikman. Fred E. Sutton writes: "The stories along the border were that Belle Starr, dressed as a man, was one of the three bandits who got Grayson's \$30,000. Whether that is true or not I do not know, but it is true that shortly afterward she blossomed out with a string of racing horses, and her entries were in all the big race meets throughout Texas."

The old-timers say that Belle always rode a side-saddle, as she thought it immodest for a woman to ride astride. She wore long riding skirts, never trousers or breeches. However, it is said that she sometimes disguised herself as a man. Many of her biographers tell of one occasion when, wearing masculine attire, she stopped at the old Riggs Hotel in Bonham, Texas. The guests were talking about Belle and Jim Reed in connection with the Watt Grayson robbery. One man, a Dallas lawyer whom Flossie Doe calls Judge Blank, said that he knew Belle intimately, and that she was no good. Belle listened to this talk in silence. The hotel was crowded, and it came about that Judge Blank and the "young man" had to share the same bed. Belle's sex was not discovered, but next morning, after breakfast, she said to the Judge: "Partner, I'm not a man. When you get home, tell your wife that you slept last night with Belle Reed!" Flossie Doe says that Belle struck the Judge with her riding-whip as she turned away, but the other biographers omit this savage touch.

Another widely told story is that Belle once set up as a rich Southern widow in an unnamed Texas town, where she "used the services of a fashionable dressmaker, milliner and beauty expert"—as Richard Venator expressed it. A regular attendant at church and Sunday School, she was more or less accepted by the respectable people of the town, who of course knew nothing of her identity. She became acquainted with a banker—Aikman says that she was a guest in the banker's home. One day she appeared in the banker's office, held him up with a pistol, and made off with a large sum of money—usually reported as \$30,000 in greenbacks. The banker was "an aged bachelor" according to Venator, but Aikman describes him as a married man, who remained tied and gagged in the office all night, and had considerable difficulty in explaining it to his jealous wife next morning.

In the late Summer of 1875 Jim Reed was shot to death by John Morris. The killing occurred at a farmhouse near McKinney, in Collins county, Texas. Flossie Doe describes Morris as a friend who betrayed his pal for blood-money, but Charlie Cummins and others have told me that Morris was a stranger whom Jim had picked up as a traveling companion. It is said that the rewards for Jim Reed, dead or alive, totalled \$5,000, but I have not been able to verify this figure.

Jim was accustomed to carry a repeating carbine in his hand, all the time. But when he and Morris stopped at this farmhouse for dinner, it appears that Jim entered the house unarmed. Flossie Doe says that Morris persuaded him to leave his guns on the saddle; Aikman thinks that Morris



pretended that the farmer had peculiar notions about firearms, so Jim left his carbine leaning against the outside of the house. A few minutes later Morris slipped out and got his own weapon, then returned to the house and shot Jim Reed, killing him. Flossie Doe tells us that Jim saw what was coming and tried to hide behind a table; Aikman says that Morris sneaked into the house and riddled Jim from behind. Anyway, there is no doubt that Morris killed Jim Reed, and that he did it in order to obtain the reward.

Morris could not collect the reward unless the body was positively identified as that of Jim Reed, and none of the people in the vicinity would admit that they had ever known the outlaw. The weather was very hot, there were no undertakers, and no way to preserve the body. The story goes (and all the biographers repeat this tale with great relish) that Belle was summoned to identify the corpse. Belle came, and examined the swollen body without a change of expression. She looked at Morris, and her lip curled scornfully. "This scoundrel Morris," she said, "appears to have murdered the wrong man. Whoever gets the reward for Jim Reed will have to kill Jim Reed. But this ain't him!" Then she rode away without another word. Jim's body was buried in an unmarked grave, and John Morris did not get the reward.

The story of Belle's refusal to identify Reed's body has been put into verse by Stanley Vestal, in a long poem entitled "Belle Starr." The same dramatic incident has been used by other writers. George Milburn's famous story "Honey Boy," first printed in *Colliers Weekly* in 1934, is a variant. It is the mother of the outlaw who refuses to identify the body in this tale, but Milburn told me that he got the idea from the Belle Starr legend.

Raymond H. Gardner, who claimed to be Belle's cousin, gives a different and somewhat less romantic account of the identification of Reed's body. "A price was set on Jim Reed's head," writes Gardner, "and after that the little family was always on the move, until Jim was killed by his supposed friend John Morris for the reward. John never collected because by some mistake the body of another man who happened to get shot at the same time was brought to the authorities."

Many people have observed that the death of Reed was the great sorrow of Belle Starr's life, and that she never quite got over it. But it seems to me that Belle was less grief-stricken than enraged, and above all thirsty for vengeance. Harmon says that she always held it against Jim's brother "Solly," of Rich Hill, Mo., that he did not hunt Morris down and kill him.

After Reed's death, Belle went back to Scyene. It appears that Judge Shirley died in 1875 or 1876. It seems certain that he died in or near Scyene, and probable that he was buried in Pleasant Mound cemetery, but Flossie Doe and others have been unable to find his grave. Strange it is, if Judge Shirley was as prominent and respected as some writers would have us believe, that there was no attempt to mark his final resting place.

Belle's mother "moved away," according to the neighbors, but it is not clear just where she went at this time. Aikman says that Belle tried to train Pearl as a dancer, and the child actually appeared upon the stage at Dallas, but she was afflicted with some nervous disease, and fainted repeatedly. We learn also that "Belle's son Eddie was not strong and seemed to be failing in health." Her father dead, her mother "moved away," and both of her children in poor health—it must have been a difficult time for Jim Reed's widow.

In 1876 Belle was running a livery-stable in the outskirts of Dallas. Whether she established the livery-stable after Reed's death (as Flossie Doe says) or whether she merely continued a business belonging to her

husband (as Aikman intimates) I do not know. Belle had some prominent and influential friends in Dallas, but she also knew many less reputable folk who had been associated with her outlaw husband. There is no doubt that Belle dealt in stolen horses at this time. Emmett Dalton, the bank-robber, a cousin to Cole Younger, refers to her as "the notorious Belle Starr, fence for horse thieves." Even Flossie Doe tacitly admits that her alleged grandmother was a thief, but explains that "stealing from a damned Yankee and stealing from a Texan were two different things. And Myra Reed never stole a horse from a Texan!"

It was noticed that Belle took many long horseback rides alone, often being absent for a week at a time. While Reed was living Belle's neighbors paid no attention to these absences—they figured that Belle was visiting her outlaw husband in some secret hideout. But since Reed's death people began to gossip about Belle's morals. It is one thing for a woman to be faithful to her lawless husband, but quite another to go about consorting with outlaws to whom she is not bound in wedlock. Many of Belle's friends dropped her at this time, and she was no longer invited to respectable homes in Dallas.

"After Reed's death," writes Frederick S. Barde, newspaperman of Guthrie, Oklahoma, "she is said to have been the common-law wife of a man named Mike McComas at Cyene, Texas, and later bore the same relation at East Dallas to a former officer in the Confederate army." I have a list of more than a dozen men whom Belle is said to have accepted as lovers at this period of her life. One in particular, who was only 17 years old at the time, tells a very interesting story and has a certain amount of documentary evidence that the story may be true. But some of these men who claim to have lived with Belle Starr probably never even saw her, and it does not seem worth while to print their testimony here.

Harmon, Aikman and others tell the tale of Belle's dealings with an old man named Patterson. In 1877 Belle and a young girl known as Emma Jones set a store building afire. The fire was probably an accident, but Belle was jailed at Dallas charged with arson. Patterson, an aged and wealthy cattleman, visited her in jail and gave her \$2,500 in cash to get her out of trouble. The authorities dismissed the arson charge, and let Belle go with a \$100 fine for "malicious mischief." She had dinner with Patterson several times, after she got out of jail. Some of Patterson's friends pointed out that Belle was \$2,400 ahead, but Patterson said, "Hell, let her keep the money. I reckon she's earned it." Patterson was not the man to give a young widow money without getting something in return, and this exploit did not help Belle's reputation in Dallas.

It is generally believed that Belle's children had lived in Scyene or Dallas up to this time, but when she got the money from Patterson in 1877, Belle sent Eddie to stay with his Grandma Reed at Rich Hill, Ho. Flossie Doe thinks that both children were sent to Rich Hill, but Harmon, Aikman and other writers say that Pearl was left with friends at Conway, Ark., for at least two years. Aikman says that Belle paid for both children's board and schooling for two years in advance. The children provided for, and Mrs. Shirley having left Dallas, Belle seems to have abandoned the livery-stable and definitely gone over to the "wild bunch." From this time forward we hear no more of her association with respectable people in Dallas.

In 1878 Belle was caught with some stolen horses in her possession, and thrown into jail at Dallas. "This might have proven disastrous," writes Flossie Doe, "had not the Deputy Sheriff fallen helplessly in love with her." After Belle had been confined for about a week, she and the deputy left for parts unknown. "The officer returned to the bosom of his family a month later, without the prisoner . . . his infatuation, for some cause, having cooled," Harmon remarks. Aikman says the deputy complained that he had no favors at all from Belle, but had been forced to cut wood,



draw water, and do all the camp cooking at the point of a pistol! Few persons who knew Belle believed this part of the story, but that's what the man told his wife when he got home.

In 1879 Belle appeared at Galena, Kan.—a tough mining-camp a few miles west of Joplin, Mo. Riley Robinson, retired mining man of Joplin, told me in 1938 that he had often seen Belle in Galena. "She was a brunette, medium height, about 130 pounds, well built and shapely. She was not so chunky as the pictures of her that I have seen. She dressed just like the other young women—nothing loud or flashy. She was a good rider, but so were all the women in the country at that time. I never saw her carrying a rifle, or wearing a pistol. Belle had a bad reputation all right, even in that tough camp, but I don't know exactly how she got it. Mostly because she run around with Bruce Younger, I reckon. Bruce and Belle lived together in several places here in Joplin, but mostly they stayed at the Evans Hotel in North Galena."

Asked if Bruce and Belle were legally married, Robinson said that he had never heard that they were. "Bruce was known as a tinhorn gambler. Lots of cheap thieves called themselves gamblers. Bruce was a cousin of Cole Younger the bank-robber. People like them didn't get married much, in those days," he added.

"Galena was full of money in the boom times," Mr. Robinson continued. "The laborers in the mines—overall boys, we called 'em—used to run around with big rolls of bills in their pockets. There was a lot of robbing and fighting and killing and hell-raising all the time. The biggest honkey-tonk in town was called the Round Top, and most of the saloons, dance-halls, whore-houses and gambling joints were on Redhot Street. Belle Starr and Bruce Younger were well known on Redhot Street."

Also in 1938 I interviewed Sam Evans, former sheriff at Galena, Kan., whose father was the owner of the Evans Hotel mentioned by Riley Robinson. Mr. Evans was a very handsome old man, with drooping white mustaches. He opined that too much damn' foolishness had been written about Belle Starr already, and said that he did not care to talk about her. After a while he admitted that Belle had lived for some time in the Evans Hotel, in 1878 or 1879, and that he remembered her very well indeed. "Her mother was with her part of the time," said Mr. Evans. "Also her brother Doc, that some people called Shug. And her daughter Pearl was there for a while, too, when she was about eight or nine years old." Asked about Bruce Younger, he made a wry face but admitted that Bruce had lived in the hotel while Belle was there. He said that he had never heard of Bruce Younger and Belle being married. As to whether they lived together as man and wife, he said that he didn't know, adding that people minded their own damn' business in those days. "Bruce Younger was just a cheap gambler who played the joints on Redhot Street," said Mr. Evans, "and I never paid him any mind." Evans said he had heard that Belle was part Cherokee, and that she certainly looked like an Indian—black hair and black eyes. "She was a mighty good-lookin' woman, well educated, quietly dressed. She was not tough like the newspapers made out. She might have shot somebody—I don't know. Probably she had, but she didn't talk about it, and she wasn't loud and vulgar like the girls are nowadays."

After seeing Evans I called on Mr. W. L. Lumbley, police judge at Galena. He was about 70 years old, and said that he had often seen Bruce Younger and Belle Starr in Galena when he was a young man. He had heard a lot of talk about them, and figured that they were mighty good people to let alone. Belle was always quietly dressed and well behaved so far as he could see, but she had a bad reputation. "There was lots of tough people here in them days" said Mr. Lumbley, "and probably Bruce and Belle was no worse than the rest of them."

Neither Harmon nor the writers who followed him—Aiken for example—seem to know anything about Belle's affair with Bruce Younger. Burton Rascoe, by far the best of all Belle's biographers, seems never to have heard of this chapter in Belle's life. But Kell Gibbons, of Springfield, Mo., told a reporter in 1931 that "Bruce Younger, a brother of Cole Younger, was a one-time lover of Belle Starr, queen of the Indian Territory outlaws." And Emerson Hough said years ago that Cole Younger really had a brother named Bruce—which is news to many people who knew the Younger boys fairly well. Rascoe and the others make no mention of Bruce Younger, but Flossie Doe knows something about the matter, for she writes: "There is one episode in Myra's life that has never been known except to a few. The name of Younger has been connected with that of Myra a great many times. Myra Reed was never married to Cole Younger. But she was married to Bruce Younger about 1878 in Coffeyville, Kan. They did not live together very long." Fred W. Allsopp, Little Rock, Ark., does not mention Bruce Younger in connection with Belle, but he may have known of this union, for he twice remarks that Sam Starr was Belle's third husband.

There is no documentary evidence, so far as I can find out, that Belle was ever legally married either to Jim Reed or Bruce Younger, or indeed that she was ever married at all until she hooked up with Sam Starr—and that was only a Cherokee tribal marriage.

Many people have said that Belle married Cole Younger, but Flossie denies this, and neither Belle nor Cole ever admitted it. Rascoe and others believe that Cole was Belle's first lover, and he may have been the father of one or more of her children, but there is no reason to suppose that they ever married. Belle's daughter Pearl called herself Pearl Younger for a while, and she may have claimed to be the daughter of Cole Younger. "Doctor" W. F. Carver, world-famous trick rifle-shot, once testified that he "knew Belle when she was the wife of Cole Younger." Joseph Burckhalter of Oklahoma City, a "Holy Roller" elder, told reporters that he preached Belle's funeral service, and added that "her real name wasn't Starr. She was married first to Cole Younger, and later to Blue Duck." In the reference to Cole Younger the Reverend Burckhalter is only repeating the common gossip of the day, but the notion that Belle had married Blue Duck may have been his own invention.

It is true that during the so-called "veiled period" in Belle's life she travelled about the country with a character known as Blue Duck—I have never heard any other name for him. According to one common legend, repeated by Aikman and the others, she and Blue Duck were riding on the prairie one day when Belle's big hat blew off. Blue Duck saw it, but paid no attention until he heard the click of Belle's pistol. "Don't you know how to treat a lady, you God damned so-and-so?" she cried. "Get down and pick up that hat, and be God damned quick about it!" And Blue Duck dismounted and retrieved the Stetson without a word.

On another occasion it is said that Blue Duck lost \$2,000 of Belle's money in a faro game at Dodge City, Kan. Belle made the unsuccessful gambler watch the horses, while she went in, stuck up the place with her six-shooter, and got away with more than \$7000. There was no resistance, though the place was full of gun-fighters. "We was all so plumb flabbergasted, we just set thar! Couldn't move a finger!" said one of the spectators afterward.

Flossie Doe tells this same story, but she makes it appear that Blue Duck lost \$7,000, and said that he had been cheated, so that Belle did no more than recover her own bankroll from a gang of card-sharps.

According to a third version of the tale, Belle saw that she had collected a larger sum than her boy-friend had lost. She grinned and said: "There is a little change due some of you gentlemen, but I haven't time



to count it out right now. Come down to the Territory and see me some day."

Most of these stories are probably without foundation, but there is no doubt that Belle was intimately associated with Blue Duck, probably over a period of several years. An old photograph, evidently a studio pose, showing Belle Starr and Blue Duck together, is owned by N. H. Rose, San Antonio, Texas. A similar picture is printed in Harmon's *Hell on the Border*, published in 1899.

Flossie Doe does not try to make this affair respectable by claiming a marriage, as she did in the case of Bruce Younger, but she admits that this man "played some part in Belle's life, for she later spent a large sum of money getting him out of prison." From another source I learn that Blue Duck was convicted of the murder of a boy named Wyrick, June 23, 1884. Fred E. Sutton mentions this in his book *Hands Up!* adding that Blue Duck was arrested by Frank E. Cochran, one of the famous United States Marshals in the Territory. Judge Isaac Parker, the "hangin' judge" of Fort Smith, sentenced him to death, but Belle hired lawyers and got the sentence commuted to life imprisonment at Menard, Ill. A year or so later, it is said, Belle's lawyers succeeded in obtaining a pardon for Blue Duck.

At some time or other, probably during her association with Blue Duck, Belle became acquainted with Jim French and Jack Spaniard, both famous outlaws of their day. Charlie Cummins, who used to edit a weekly newspaper at Port Gibson, Indian Territory, told me in 1936 that he had known French very well. French lived with his parents at Port Gibson, and was not a bad boy at all, but merely a little wild. After he ran around with Belle for awhile he did become an outlaw, but Cummins thinks that many of the crimes attributed to him were committed by others. French was shot and killed by an officer in the streets of Nowata, Okla., according to Cummins.

Most of the newspaper stories about Belle as "Queen of the Outlaws" seem to have begun about the time of her association with Blue Duck, Jim French and Jack Spaniard. Some old-timers have mentioned Cherokee Bill and Jesse Smith as members of the Belle Starr gang. Mike Murphy, of Springfield, Mo., told me that he saw Belle near Poteau, I.T., in May, 1880. She stuck up Murphy's party, and robbed them of some clothing and other trifles. "She had four road-agents with her," said Murphy. "There was Cherokee Bill, Red McCarty, Choctaw Charlie and a black-lookin' devil with whiskers that I never seen before."

Whatever may be the truth about Belle's leading a gang of outlaws through the West, before the end of 1880 she was back in the Territory. It is certain that she visited Tom Starr's place near Briartown, where Jim Reed used to hide out in the old days. It may be that Belle had visited this place before, in 1869 or 1870, after Jim killed Shannon, just before the overland trip to California.

It was about this time that Belle became somehow involved with Sam Starr, one of Tom Starr's younger sons. Sam was about 20 years old, while Belle was in her 30's. Despite the difference in their ages, Flossie Doe assures us that "they were not so unevenly matched, since Myra Reed had remained as agile and lithe as a girl. She could outride most men on a day's trip, and her sense of humor never left her." Despite Belle's sense of humor, Tom Starr was horrified at the idea of his son taking up with a widow 10 years his senior, who had nothing to offer but two children and a very bad reputation. He did everything he could to stop the match. Some of the Starrs have said that Belle literally kidnapped Sam. At any rate, the two rode off together, and are next heard from in a cowcamp called Ogallala, Nebraska.

It seems certain that Belle and Sam were united in a Cherokee tribal marriage, but whether they were ever married "white folks' fashion" is

unknown. Flossie Doe says that they were married in 1880 by Judge Abe Woodall, presumably a Justice of the Peace, but she apparently does not know where this alleged wedding occurred. Richard Venator reports that "the pair were married on George's Fork, between Porum and Warner, Indian Territory," while Aikman thinks that they may have been married in Nebraska.

Sam and Belle Starr set up housekeeping in 1881, and it appears that they lived for some time in a little "box house" that stood a mile or two south of the present town of Porum, Okla. Later they moved to a farm some eight miles above Briartown, in a bend of the Canadian River. Belle called this place Younger's Bend, and there have been many speculations about the name. J.S. Atchley, Stilwell, Okla., says that it was so called because the Younger brothers frequented the spot. "Sam being a full-blood," Atchley continues, "they chose this allotment in Section 2, Township 9, Range 19, the extreme southeastern part of what is now Muskogee County, Oklahoma." Aikman also speaks of this farm as a 1,000-acre claim, but Flossie Doe says that Sam and Belle bought the place, and that it was only a 10-acre patch. Belle's new home was about 10 or 12 miles west of the old Tom Starr place, which is not far from Briartown.

The house at Younger's Bend has been described as a large structure, with a grand piano and fine furniture freighted in from St. Louis. But in reality it was just an ordinary log cabin, with no more than two rooms. Frederick S. Barde, Guthrie, Okla., says it was about 14 feet square, with a little porch on the south side, and a small cellar under the lean-to kitchen. Flossie Doe describes it as "about 15 by 20 feet, with a large fireplace at one side, and a lean-to kitchen at the back. The walls were 'papered' with cloth—an old Cherokee custom. Most Indians used cheap gaudy muslin, but Belle chose 'white calico with a little sprig of flowers pattern.' There was one bed—perhaps two—a table, several chairs, a good lamp, and some book-shelves. There was no piano. Belle thought seriously of buying a parlor organ once, but the purchase was never made.

Many writers have imagined that Sam Starr built the house at Younger's Bend for his bride. The old-timers say, however, that the Starr cabin was built by a man named Dempsey Hannel, and occupied for many years by a Cherokee fullblood known as Big Head. This Big Head was believed to have buried \$10,000 in gold coin on the premises, and to have died without telling anybody where it was hidden. Members of the Starr family have said jokingly that Belle and Sam spent most of their married life in hunting for this money, and dug holes all over the place.

The legend of buried gold still lingers about Younger's Bend, and people have come from all parts of the country, equipped with buckskin maps, divining-rods and all the other impedimenta of the treasure-seeker. When Steele Kennedy visited the place in 1933 he found an old man named Petty in possession, who had lived there since 1913. At one time he was much annoyed by fellows who slipped up to the place at night—he could see their flashlights flickering all around the house, "like a lot of damned lightnin'-bugs." Word was sent out that treasure-hunters were welcome to dig in broad daylight, but they had best not disturb Mr. Petty at night. "There is not a square foot on the place," Petty told Kennedy, "which has not been dug up from one to 20 times by treasure-hunters. But nothing has ever been reported as being found here." Some of these fellows expect to find money and jewels hidden by the James boys, the Younger brothers, or the Dalton gang. Others think that Belle herself concealed valuables in or near the cabin, but the most persistent diggers are still looking for old Big Head's \$10,000 in gold.

There is no doubt that numerous outlaws used Younger's Bend as a hideout. Flossie Doe admits that the James boys took refuge there on at least one occasion—she explains that Jesse was a friend of Jim Reed, that



they had been neighbors in Missouri, and had been "on the scout" together. Harmon says that many outlaws stopped there, adding that they were Belle's friends rather than Sam's, and that poor Sam was not always told their right names. Steele Kennedy repeats the story that Jesse James and the Younger boys visited Belle on the Canadian River.

Raymond H. Gardner says that he met both Frank and Jesse James at "Aunt Belle's" place, also Cole Younger who wore expensive boots with the initials "C.Y." in silver! The James and Younger boys were all very religious, according to Gardner. When they sat down to dinner Belle asked Cole to "return thanks for the food," which he did. "The reason was that Younger, like the James boys, was the son of a Baptist minister. They stuck to their religion to their deaths and it was a great consolation to them, in their worried and dangerous lives. Somehow their religion and their man-killing never seemed to interfere with each other. They were as pious a lot of robbers and murderers as I ever knew," says Gardner.

Federal officers, working out of Judge Parker's court at Fort Smith, soon got wind of the fact that Belle and Sam were sheltering outlaws. They kept an eye on Younger's Bend. One visit by officers is described by Gardner, who says that "Aunt Belle stood behind the door with a .45 Colts in each hand," while Frank and Jesse James were hiding outside the house. Gardner himself met the intruders, telling them that the men who lived in the cabin had moved away, and the officers went on about their business.

Gardner does not mention the presence of either Sam Starr or Pearl at the time of his visit, but Flossie Doe and others make it plain that Pearl lived with her mother in the house at Younger's Bend. It is not clear to me where Eddie was. Perhaps he was still living at his Grandma Reed's place in Missouri, where Belle sent him in 1877. It appears that Sam was away from home a good deal, on some business of his own, and that Belle also made long trips, visiting the Reed family occasionally. On one of these visits she met Mabel Harrison, a 15-year-old girl whose mother had been murdered by robbers, and who was staying at the Reed farm. Belle took this girl home with her as a companion for Pearl, and both girls attended a little private school near Briartown.

Most of the crimes with which Belle was credited—apart from horse-stealing—were sizeable robberies. But there is no doubt that many of her companions stooped to petty thievery, and no reason to believe that Belle did not do the same. Mike Murphy, Springfield, Mo., told me that he was with a group of travelers in the Territory in 1880, when they were set upon by Belle Starr and four male companions. The robbers took fresh horses in exchange for their worn-out animals, also some food, articles of clothing and other trifles. Murphy said that the gang "regularly held up travelers and bootlegged liquor to the Indians." Joe Synar, Muskogee, Okla., reported that Belle and Sam Starr committed "a series of holdups in which traveling men and peddlers were the victims." Presumably the traveling men were salesmen or "drummers" who traveled through the country in covered wagons.

In 1882 Belle and Sam were arrested for horse stealing. Flossie Doe says that one of their neighbors stole a horse from another neighbor, and that the Starrs were unjustly accused. Barde thinks that they stole two horses—a gray mare from Samuel Campbell and a bay gelding from Andrew Crane. Aikman quotes the Starrs as claiming that they were framed by an ex-marshal, who stole somebody's colt and put it in Sam's corral. Atchley reports that Sam and Belle "were caught with two stolen horses that had disappeared from the farm of John West." However this may be, they were prosecuted by W.H. Clayton at Fort Smith, and Judge Isaac Parker sentenced them both to a year in the House of Correction at Detroit, Mich.

According to Flossie Doe's story, Belle sent Pearl and Mabel Harrison

to live with a certain "Mamma Mac, who lived close to Briartown on a little Indian farm." Harmon says that Pearl stayed with an old friend in Oswego, Kan., whom she called "Mamma Mac." Atchley thinks that Pearl was sent to visit "a relative in Kansas." Pearl called herself Pearl Younger at this time, and Belle addressed her as Pearl Younger, but she said that her daughter's real name was Reed, and many friends of the family knew her as Pearl Starr. Riley Robinson, retired mining man of Joplin, Mo., told me that "Pearl Starr lived at a hotel in Parsons, Kan., run by a family named McLaughlin, while her mother was in prison. I saw her there in 1882 or 1883. A pretty little thing, probably about 15 years old."

Here is a letter which Belle wrote to her daughter just before she left for Detroit, in February, 1883. It was written at Fort Smith, and addressed to Miss Pearl Younger, Oswego, Kan. This letter was first published by Harmon in 1899 and has been reprinted since by many writers. Even Rascoe is apparently persuaded that it is genuine. Flossie Doe remarks "I have talked to people who say she wrote the letter and Pearl received it." Atchley appends a note **Copied from the Original** to his text of this letter, but it is exactly like the one published by Harmon 40 years previously.

My Dear Little One:

It is useless to attempt to conceal my trouble from you and though you are nothing but a child I have confidence that my darling will bear with fortitude what I now write.

I shall be away from you a few months, baby, and have only this consolation to offer you, that never again will I be placed in such humiliating circumstances and that in the future your tender little heart shall never more ache, or a blush called to your cheek on your mother's account. Sam and I were tried here, Jim West the main witness against us. We were found guilty and sentenced to nine months at the House of Correction, Detroit, Michigan, for which place we start in the morning.

Now Pearl, there is a vast difference in that place and a penitentiary; you must bear that in mind, and not think of mamma being shut up in a gloomy prison. It is said to be one of the finest institutions in the United States, surrounded by beautiful grounds, with fountains and everything nice. There I can have my education renewed, and I stand sadly in need of it. Sam will have to attend school and I think it is the best thing ever happened for him, and now you must not be unhappy and brood over our absence. It won't take the time long to glide by, and as we come home we will get you and then we will have such a nice time.

We will get your horse up and I will break him, and you can ride John while I am gentling Loco. We will have Eddie with us, and will be as gay and happy as the birds we claim at home. Now baby, you can either stay with Grandma or your Mamma Mac, just as you like and do the best you can until I come back, which won't be long. Tell Eddie that he can go down home with us and have a good time hunting, and though I wish not to deprive Marion and Ma of him for any length of time, yet I must keep him a while. Love to Ma and Marion.

Uncle Tom has stood by me nobly in our trouble, done everything that one could do. Now baby, I will write to you often. You must write to your Grandma but don't tell her of this; and to your



Aunt Ellen, Mamma Mac, but to no one else. Remember, I don't care who writes to you, you must not answer. I say this because I do not want you to correspond with anybody in the Indian Territory. My baby, my sweetest little one, and you must mind me. Except Auntie—if you wish to hear from me Auntie will let you know. If you should write me, Ma would find out where I am and Pearl, you must never let her know. Her head is overburdened with care now, and therefore you must keep this carefully guarded from her.

Destroy this letter as soon as read. As I told you before, if you wish to stay a while with your Mamma Mac, I am willing. But you must devote your time to your studies. Bye, bye, sweet baby mine.

#### BELLE STARR.

Flossie Doe tells us that Mamma Mac lived close to Briartown, not far from Younger's Bend. But it may be she was Miss or Mrs. McLaughlin, who had something to do with hotels in Oswego, Kan., or in the nearby town of Parsons, Kan. The Ma of the letter is apparently Belle's mother, who moved away from Scyene shortly after Judge Shirley's death, and whom we next heard of as visiting Belle at Galena, Kan., in 1878 or 1879. From this letter it appears that Pearl was in close contact with Belle's mother while Belle was in prison, hence the caution about not letting Ma know. The fourth paragraph of the letter seems to mean that Eddie had been staying with Belle's mother, rather than with the Reed family at Rich Hill, as some writers have assumed. Grandma was evidently Mrs. Reed, the mother of Jim Reed. The Marion mentioned is perhaps the Uncle Marion who later took Pearl on a trip to Wichita, according to Flossie Doe's account, but whether he was one of Jim Reed's brothers I do not know. I have likewise been unable to identify Aunt Ellen and Auntie, who may be one and the same person.

Not much is known about the Starrs' experiences in the House of Correction. Atchley says that "Sam being a fullblood and not familiar with the ways of the white man, fared badly in prison." Aikman tells us how Belle was led into the chair-factory by the warden, who said "Take a chair"—meaning that Belle should pick up a chair-frame and be taught how to weave a cane seat for it. "No thank you, sir. I think it is proper for me to stand, in this place," Belle replied with gentle sadness. Thereupon the warden, impressed by Belle's ladylike behavior, assigned her the lightest work available, and she spent most of her leisure in discussing literature with the matron, who urged her to write a book! Flossie Doe repeats this tale about the chair, adding that Belle tutored the warden's children in music and French. "And for years afterward, when she was back in the territory, the warden sent boxes of fruit to Belle and her family," concludes Flossie. Belle could play the piano and the guitar, and might possibly have given music-lessons in the prison. But I have been unable to find any evidence that she knew French, or any language save English and a few words of the Cherokee tongue that she had picked up in the Territory.

When Sam and Belle were released they returned at once to Younger's Bend, and brought Pearl along with them. Pearl was 14 now, and looked older—a very pretty girl with brown hair and blue eyes. The men at Younger's Bend called her the Canadian Lily, according to Flossie Doe's tale. Belle's son Ed Reed, who never used the name Starr, ran away from Missouri and joined them at Younger's Bend. Mabel Harrison, whom Belle had brought from Rich Hill, Mo., some years before, was living with them at this time. It appears that they all got along very well together

for a while, and life on the Canadian was pleasant but comparatively uneventful.

Belle fixed up the cabin and cultivated a very fine flower-garden—sent all over the country for slips and roots and bulbs. She was not much interested in housework, but could cook a very good meal when she was in the mood. Ordinarily Pearl and Mabel did the cooking. Belle would not have a chicken on the place, because chickens destroyed her flowers, but there were plenty of wild turkeys in the neighborhood. Sam Starr and Ed Reed were both hunters, and kept the table well supplied with game. Pearl had two tame fawns, there was always a milk-cow, and several good saddle-horses in the corral.

I have never heard that Belle affiliated with any church organization, and it is significant that not one of her several marriages was solemnized by a minister. However, she was not above attending religious meetings occasionally. She was charitable and generous to a fault, and always ready to help her neighbors in distress. She hated Jim West, who had been chiefly responsible for her imprisonment. But Flossie Doe tells us that when West's wife was in childbirth, with only some small children to take care of her, Belle rode over and stayed several days and nights at the West cabin. For this kindness Belle was invited to name the baby, says Flossie, "and today one of the West sons bears the name which Belle gave him."

According to Aikman and others, it seems that Sam Starr had robbed a postoffice somewhere, and spent most of the year 1885 hiding out from the Federal officers. He had been in New Mexico and elsewhere, with occasional short trips to visit his family in the Territory. In 1886 Belle herself was arrested in connection with some stolen horses, and was spending a good deal of time conferring with her attorneys in Fort Smith.

The Little Rock *Gazette*, dated September 20, 1886, carried the following item:

Fort Smith, Sept. 18. Belle Starr, who is here on bond awaiting trial, has received a letter from her home on the Canadian River stating that her husband, Sam Starr, who has been dodging the officers for several years, had been badly wounded in a conflict with the Indian police. Belle said that her information was that the police fired on and wounded Sam, killing his horse, without demanding his surrender and that about 50 shots had been exchanged in the fight. Belle has the court's permission to be absent until next Wednesday, and will leave in the morning for her husband's bedside.

According to J.S. Atchley's version of the tale, Sam was shot in the head. The officers thought that the wound must surely prove fatal, but Sam revived after a while, seized a gun from one of the guards, and escaped.

At any rate, when Belle got home she found Sam at liberty, hiding in the woods near Briartown. Belle advised him to surrender to the officers at Fort Smith, which he did. On November 17, 1886, Sam and Felix Griffin were arraigned and released on bond. The trial was set for March 7, 1887. Belle, Pearl and Mabel Harrison had gone with Sam to Fort Smith, and now all four started back to Younger's Bend together.

On the way home they stopped for the night at the settlement then known as Oklahoma, which is now called Whitefield. There was a dance



that night at the home of Mrs. Lucy Surratt, the mother of Cooper Surratt. This house was on the south side of the Canadian, not far from the old Starr home on the north side of the river. There was a fire of logs in the yard, and Frank West was seated with several other men near the fire. Sam Starr had said previously that West was with the posse which had fired on him.

Just what happened at Surratt's house is not known exactly, but it is certain that both Sam Starr and Frank West fired their revolvers, and that both men were killed. S.W. Harmon and Frederick Barde agree that Sam was drinking at the time, and Harmon dismisses the affair as "a drunken fight at a dance." Barde and Atchley say that Sam fired the first shot, while Flossie Doe writes "it is said that they shot almost simultaneously." Joe Synar and Richard Venator have it that West was sitting on the ground, and that Sam fired at him without warning; as West fell over he drew his gun, rested on his elbow, and shot Sam in the chest. At any rate, Sam died a few minutes after the shooting. The women took Sam's body home, and it was buried in the Starr graveyard, on a hill near the old Tom Starr homestead, not far from Briartown.

What was done about the charge of horse-stealing that stood against Belle does not appear in the records that I have seen. Flossie Doe does not mention Belle's arrest at all; Duncan Aikman says that Belle was tried and acquitted. It seems quite certain that she was not imprisoned for this offense.

In 1886 Pearl was 17 years old, and she fell in love with a neighbor boy, part Cherokee, two or three years her senior. This young man's name is not mentioned in the accounts that I have read, but the old-timers say that he was a fine young man, and was somehow related to the Starr family. Early in 1887 Belle discovered that her daughter was pregnant, and raised a tremendous disturbance about it. One story is that Pearl was secretly married to her Cherokee lover, the knot being tied by "old Doc Bullard" of the Briartown community; this is the story that Pearl is supposed to have told Flossie Doe, some 30-odd years after the event. Harmon and most of the other writers say that Belle sent the young man a forged letter, supposedly from Pearl, saying that she was about to marry a rich man and did not care to see him again. According to one account, Belle chased the young Cherokee out of the country at the point of a pistol. Harmon, Aikman and other writers agree that Belle really did force Pearl to marry a wealthy old man who kept a livery-stable in Fort Smith.

The scene that Belle made over her daughter's misfortune was in the nature of a public disgrace, and Pearl was fed up with the whole business. Pretending that she was going out for a short ride, she left Younger's Bend and fled to the Reed family at Rich Hill, Mo.

According to one writer, when Pearl arrived in Rich Hill she learned that the Reeds were visiting relatives in Wichita, Kan. "Uncle Marion," whoever he was, took Pearl to Wichita. The Reeds were terribly frightened when they learned of all this—they were afraid that Belle would come to Wichita and make trouble, perhaps even murder somebody. Finally Uncle Marion and Grandma Reed accompanied Pearl to Siloam Springs, Ark., where her baby was born April 22, 1887. It was all very secret. Pearl named the little girl Mamie, and hid out with her for several months, then returned to the Reed home in Missouri.

Flossie Doe says that the father of the child could not find out where Pearl had gone—she did not write him, and Belle would tell him nothing. Perhaps Belle did not know anything to tell. The young man was a Cherokee, anyhow, and Pearl's desertion automatically relieved him all responsibility, under the tribal law. So he went off and married another girl. Harmon tells us that the livery-stable keeper, to whom Pearl was

legally married, realized that she did not intend to live with him, so he divorced her and married somebody else.

In August or September, 1887, Pearl returned to her mother at Younger's Bend, leaving the baby with Grandma Reed at Rich Hill, Mo. A few months later the child was taken by a sister of Jim Reed's who lived in Wichita—I think this is the woman that Pearl called Aunt Mamie. Finally, by means of a paper bearing Pearl's signature, dated November 19, 1888, the baby was admitted to an orphanage. Flossie Doe, who got her information from Pearl some 35 years later, insists that Pearl was tricked into abandoning the baby, that Belle held her virtually as a prisoner at Younger's Bend, that Pearl's mail was tampered with, that Belle threatened to kidnap the child and give it to the gypsies, that Pearl's signature on the orphanage record was a forgery, and so on.

It was in 1887, I think, that Pearl took up with the last of her lovers—a fullblood Cherokee named Billy July, alias Jim July, alias Jim Starr. This latter name, according to Frederick Barde, was conferred upon him by Belle after he came to live in her house. It is said, however, that he was distantly related to the Starr family. Aikman, Atchley and others have said that he was a cousin of Sam Starr. July was a small-time thief, and was held in low esteem by his associates.

In these later years Belle sometimes took part in riding contests at county fairs and the like—people came from miles around to see her. On one occasion she assisted in a Wild West exhibition at the Sebastian County Fair Grounds in Fort Smith. Part of the show was a sham stage-coach robbery, with Judge Parker and other notables as passengers. Belle and her pals stuck up the stage in true Wild West fashion, with a great firing of blank cartridges. Belle had tried to get Attorney W. H. Clayton to ride in the coach, but he refused to risk it. Clayton was the man who had sent Belle and Sam Starr to prison, and had abused poor Sam shamefully in the courtroom. Belle was quoted as saying that she had one loaded cartridge among her blanks, and would have enjoyed shooting Clayton "by accident."

At this fair also was one A.A. Power, the editor of the Fort Smith Evening Call. Power was a little, pompous, bespectacled man, a would-be politician. Suddenly Belle was seen coming around the track at a full gallop, with little Editor Power slung across the saddle in front of her, kicking and struggling and yelling at the top of his voice. Aikman thinks that Belle snatched Power up out of the crowd, on her own initiative. J.S. Atchley says that "some sports picked him up and threw him astride the horse on which Belle Starr was seated."

Belle, July and Pearl lived together amicably at the Bend for some time, and Ed Reed was there a part of the Winter of 1887-1888. Ed had been in several small difficulties, and was recovering from a gunshot wound when Pearl came home in the Autumn of 1887. Ed caused his mother a lot of trouble. He was 17 years old, and large for his age, but Belle did not hesitate to whip him very severely on occasion, particularly one time when he had abused one of her horses. Harmon and others have said that Ed repeatedly threatened his mother's life.

Belle had also quarreled with a neighbor, one Edgar A. Watson, sometimes known as Charles Coleman. Some say that Watson had leased Belle's land, or tried to lease it, and that the quarrel arose because of this. Others believe that Watson took one of Belle's letters out of the postoffice at Eufala, and did not deliver it to Belle. Duncan Aikman thinks that Mrs. Watson confided to Belle that her husband had killed a man in Florida, and that Belle taunted him with this. Barde repeats the story that Watson and July were partners in some petty theft, and that Watson refused to give July his share of the loot. Fred E. Sutton says bluntly that Watson was in love with Belle, and that she had repulsed him publicly, and even refused to dance with him. Richard Venator quotes the old-timers to



the effect that Watson had been one of Belle's lovers, and that she had jilted him. Whatever the cause, it is a fact that there was bitter feeling between Belle Starr and Edgar A. Watson, and intemperate words on both sides.

On February 2, 1889, July started to ride into Fort Smith, where he had to appear in federal court to answer a charge of horse stealing. Belle rode with him, and the two spent the night together at the home of Mrs. Nail, who lived on San Bois creek, 20 miles east of Whitefield. Next morning July proceeded on his way to Fort Smith, and Belle rode back alone toward Younger's Bend. Barde says that Belle stopped for a while at the King Creek store, on the south side of the river, about 11 A.M. Later on she visited another place—Barde says the home of a man named Barnes, Atchley thinks it was the Jack Rose farm. Anyhow, it was very near to Edgar A. Watson's home, and only about two miles from Younger's Bend.

Leaving this place, Belle rode on slowly, and near the Canadian River ford she was murdered. Somebody shot her from behind, using a shotgun loaded with turkey-shot. Aikman and others have said that she was ambushed, and that after she fell from the saddle the slayer approached and fired again into her breast, to make sure that she was dead.

Harmon, Aikman, Sutton and Barde say that Watson was the murderer, and most of the old-timers that I have interviewed agree. Flossie Doe evidently regards Watson as the guilty man—"neighbors still tell who did it, but it was never proven." Some of the neighbors, as Harmon admitted in 1899, were convinced that Ed Reed was the killer. Frank Dalton always claimed that Ed Reed shot his mother by mistake—it was dusk, and Ed mistook her for a marshal coming out to arrest him. Some friends of the family told me that the Reeds always thought that Pearl was involved in the crime—"you couldn't hardly blame her, after Belle went an' ruined her life that-a-way." J.E. Atchley, as far as I know, is the only writer who has even hinted that Pearl might be responsible. Neither Pearl nor Ed Reed were publicly accused at the time. Jim July had Watson arrested, but there was not sufficient evidence for a murder charge, and he was released. Barde says that Watson had a good reputation at this time, and some prominent merchants went to Fort Smith and convinced Judge Parker of his innocence so they turned him loose.

Some women of the Younger's Bend neighborhood prepared Belle Starr's body for burial, and the men built a rude coffin. Belle was buried in her own front yard—where, according to Flossie Doe, she had requested to be laid. Barde says that there was no religious service, no minister, no prayer. None of the other biographers, so far as I know, mention any religious ceremony at Belle's burial, but the old-timers say that several Indians dropped little pinches of cornmeal into the coffin just before it was closed—this is said to be an old Cherokee custom. In 1939 a Holy Roller evangelist told reporters that he "preached Belle Starr's funeral," but a close friend of the Starr family says that there was no minister there, and that he would not have been allowed to speak, if he had been present.

Belle's grave is surrounded today by a rough stone wall about two feet high. Two large slabs of limestone are tilted over the top, like the roof of a house. A piece of white marble is cemented into the stone wall at the head of the grave. Barde says that this white stone was carved by Joseph Dailey, a local stone-cutter. At the top is the figure of a horse, with the BS brand on its shoulder. Above the horse is a large star, and just in front of it a rudely carved bell. Below this is what seems to be a hand, clasped about a bunch of flowers. On the stone is the following inscription:

## BELLE STARR

Born in Carthage, Missouri,

February 3, 1848.

Died February 3, 1889.

Shed not for her the bitter tear  
Nor give the heart to vain regret,  
'Tis but the casket that lies here,  
The gem that filled it sparkles yet.

Edgar A. Watson, according to Barde, was convicted of another crime somewhere in Arkansas, and was shot down by prison guards when he tried to escape from the Arkansas penitentiary. While still under indictment for stealing horses, Jim July jumped his bond and fled into the Choctaw country, where he was overtaken and killed by Bud Trainer, a United States Deputy Marshal. Ed Reed, as his mother so often predicted, came to a bad end: he turned policeman, and met his death in a drunken fight at Wagoner, Okla., in 1896. Pearl Starr prospered mightily after Belle's death, and for more than a decade she operated the Pea Green House in Fort Smith—the most magnificent bawdy-house in Arkansas, the pride and joy of the whole Southwest. She married several times, and had four children, some of them reared in orphan asylums, without any knowledge of their distinguished ancestry. About 1918 she retired from "show business," as she called it, and died quietly in bed at Bisbee, Arizona, in 1925.

Belle Starr has been dead for more than 50 years, but people in the West and Southwest have not forgotten her. Poets still write verses to her, radio cowboys sing ballads about her, artists paint pictures of her, authors write volumes in her praise, magazine and newspaper writers have done literally hundreds of Belle Starr stories. In 1930 the Governor of Oklahoma, at his own expense, had a large bronze statue of Belle Starr made, which he presented to his home town of Ponca City; it is set up in a very prominent place, too, and thousands of tourists stop their cars to look at it every season. Roadside taverns and gift-shops sell postcards with Belle's picture on 'em, not not only in Oklahoma but in several other Western states. No less an actress than Elizabeth Ginty played "Aunt Belle" in *Missouri Legend*, which had a long Broadway run in 1939-1940. There was a moving picture entitled *Belle Starr* in 1941, with Miss Gene Tierney in the title role, and Randolph Scott playing Sam Starr. It is said that this picture was quite as popular in the Northern and Eastern states as it was in the Southwest.

It is difficult to understand just what there was about Belle Starr that gave her such a hold on the popular imagination. Belle was not a beautiful woman, merely a good-looking one. She was not a romantic figure in the modern biological sense—many Hollywood girls can boast more and better lovers than Belle ever had. There was nothing sensational or glamorous about her associates; with one possible exception, they were just cheap thugs and horse-thieves. She was not implicated in any of the really big robberies of her day, or any of the important killings. Fred Sutton always claimed that Belle had murdered seven men, just because he found seven notches on the stock of her Winchester carbine. People who knew Belle intimately say that she may have killed one man, possibly two—but there is no real proof that she ever killed anybody at all. It is significant that she was never formally charged with murder, or ever convicted of anything except stealing a few horses.

I was talking with a man named Colcord once, an old-time Oklahoman who had served as a United States Marshal, and knew the whole Starr tribe personally. I asked him why it was that Belle Starr, who was



never anything more than a petty thief, with no particular talents or accomplishments, should be remembered while so many more important outlaws were forgotten. "Well," said he, "I reckon it's because Belle had the old fire—what the boys call **moxie** nowadays."

I believe that old Colonel Colcord knows as much about these matters as any man alive. And it seems to me that "old fire" and "moxie" are as good words as any to designate the rare something-or-other that Belle Starr undoubtedly had.





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